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# *The Sensitive Screen Beyond Cinema*

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Traducteur : Simon Pleasance

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# The Sensitive Screen Beyond Cinema

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## RÉFÉRENCE

Jean-Louis Boissier, *L'Ecran comme mobile*, Genève : Mamco, 2016

*Arts plastiques/cinéma : Mikhaïl Bakhtine et les arts*, Bruxelles : La Part de l'Œil, 2016, (La Part de l'Œil ; 30)

*Vivre par(mi) les écrans*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2016, (Perceptions). Sous la dir. de Jacopo Bodini, Mauro Carbone, Anna Caterina Dalmaso

*Voir selon les écrans, penser selon les écrans*, Paris : Mimésis, 2016, (Images, médiums). Sous la dir. de Jacopo Bodini, Mauro Carbone

*Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2016*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016. Sous la dir. de Chrissie Iles

1 1.

- 2 To mark the Alain Fleischer retrospective at the Maison européenne de la photographie in Paris in 2003 (*La Vitesse d'évasion*), Hubert Damisch returned to his *Ecrans sensible* [Sensitive Screens] (1993-1994). The first part of the installation was quite familiar: the projection of moving images onto a "screen-like" surface, in continuity with the transformation of the museum's rooms into screening rooms, and of the projected images into exhibited images. From a post-cinematographic angle beyond institutional cinema, Jean-Christophe Royoux has called this arrangement "exhibition cinema".<sup>1</sup> However, once the projection of a single, static shot lasting ten minutes or so was over, performers brandishing brushes covered that white, available surface, whose projection had repressed its material nature, with a whitish liquid, or rather a developer. This enabled the spectators to witness an unexpected experience: the gradual upsurge of black and white images on the screen, in effect those "deposited", so to speak, during the projection, "the first lineaments of an image that tallied with the imprint which that

sensitive surface had kept of the film that had just been projected onto it”,<sup>2</sup> as Hubert Damisch explains.

- 3 The *Ecrans sensibles*—used again by Alain Fleischer in 1996 [*Ecran sensible (Un film en six tableaux)*, 16 mm.]—first of all show us to what extent our experience of screens is still delimited by film, as a visual and architectural system. The metonymic relation between screen and film is so narrow that we still regard the screen, in a subsidiary way, as an empty frame, ready to accommodate everything that is projected onto it, and which, like the polished surface of a sheet of glass, leaves no trace. “Cursed double of the projected image, it permits its appearance, but invariably only in its quality as a reflecting surface: *per se*, the traditional screen is condemned to possess nothing of the image”.<sup>3</sup> Whence the importance of paying attention to art historians like Hubert Damisch who have thought about the figure of the screen—a non-systematic focus of interest, but identifiable throughout his career—as if the issue of Renaissance perspective could only culminate in the issue of the film projection. In 1997, outside of the disciplinary tradition of film history but broaching issues that are now relevant for all historians of the image, Hubert Damisch raised the issue of the “consequences of the digitization of images and of the novel datum of a screen that is itself ‘virtual’, the datum imposed by synthetic images and simulation techniques which are nowadays on the agenda”.<sup>4</sup> For his part, Alain Fleischer did not restrict himself to mere freeze frames, or a technique, in order to fix a projected film, and condense it in a single image, as in Hiroshi Sugimoto’s *Theaters* series. On the contrary, he clung to the idea of photographing a film, and making film images that are offered to the eye in a form other than that of the picture, but which retain its appearance, not to say specter, which, according to Hubert Damisch, has taken the place of the picture as both object and ruse.<sup>5</sup> By projecting moving images onto photo-sensitive paper, which, despite great loss, are exposed our eyes, the *Ecrans sensibles* mingle film and photography. In a more insidious way, they carry out misconstruction of photography which ends up destabilizing the institutional film discourse. In the film projection, the image arrives because of the screen’s structural inability to retain the light images which are projected on it. “Every time one image replaces another. Every time the following image chases the previous one away, while, needless to add, more or less retaining the memory of it”,<sup>6</sup> said Jean-Luc Godard in *Ici et ailleurs* (1974). Godard returned to the perception of the co-existence of successive time-frames in *Eloge de l’amour* (2001), where the initial images suggested to Bruno Goosse Sigmund Freud’s famous passage about the city of Rome as if “nothing in it had ever been destroyed”: “If we want to translate the historic succession into space, we can only do so by spatially putting things side by side; the same unity of place in no way puts up with two different contents”.<sup>7</sup> In the end, might exhibition cinema be akin to Freud’s Rome as an image of memory, “a space in which successive objects co-exist, solely oriented by the body of the person passing through it, introduced by this traverse of a status of time editor”?<sup>8</sup>

4 2.

- 5 Let us come back to Hubert Damisch. By stressing the “mnemonic, or reproductive, or even imaginary function” of photography, over and above its mimetic and mirror-like power, he makes a distinction between two accepted meanings of the screen which are seemingly irreconcilable (both present in Alain Fleischer’s installation): on the one hand, the *mirror-screen*, on the other the *sensitive screen*. The mirror-screen is a “reflecting surface on which an image is projected, or which intercepts it, without retaining anything of it—the screen that is by design insensitive, and which must get in the way of any

imprint, so that the image arrives, before going back to white, once the projection is over.” The whole history of film is dependent upon this accepted meaning of screen. The sensitive screen, on the other hand, is “equipped with memory, in the depths of which an image is deposited or formed, without there being any need, at least, for any exhibition or any projection, any more than any developer, but by simple injection, manipulation, or transfer of signals.”<sup>9</sup> If this second accepted meaning is inspired by the experimental work done by Alain Fleischer, Hubert Damish also includes in it the contemporary digital environment, cathode-ray screens, plasma screens and liquid crystal screens, which is to say, material surfaces which no longer have any need, as was still the case with the *Ecrans sensibles*, for manual intervention for the memory to be kindled and made visible.

- 6 In more subtle ways, Damish triggers an archaeology of the distinction between mirror-screen and sensitive screen which might date back to the very early days of cinema, as well as to the distinction made by Sigmund Freud between the system of consciousness-perception and that of unconscious-memory, and which, as Damish had already pointed out, “can be verified nowhere else better than in the cinema.”<sup>10</sup> By emphasizing the similarities between cinema and physical apparatus and between the filmic state and the dream-like state already explored by Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, Hubert Damish refers in particular to what Freud called the “cover-memory” (*Deckerinnerungen*)--a word which the English translator had the foresight to translate by “screen memory”.<sup>11</sup> This screen memory grasped a process akin to poetic fiction, the projection of a fantasy or an unconscious thought about a real childhood memory. This projection has an indifferent and inoffensive content, and blocks the recollection of a repressed event. Involved here is a cover surface, a “screen-image” [*image-écran*] or “case-screen” [*image-écrin*] signed by a “failure to see”, as has been well explained by Luc Vancheri.<sup>12</sup>

7 3.

- 8 Screeners and readers, touch-screen servers and smart telephones, reactive screens and new media in the architectural and urban space, a display-screen “which intercepts and organizes data flows”,<sup>13</sup> Google Glass<sup>14</sup> and other wearable technologies: the screen, today, is no longer a simple mediating surface. According to Vivian Sobchack, the “screen-scape” has henceforth become a “screen-sphere”: “we are nowadays living first and foremost in and through screens, rather than on or with them”, in a condition of ‘screenness’.<sup>15</sup> This is how “all things are becoming screens” (Bernard Stiegler).<sup>16</sup>

- 9 What is involved, in particular, is a re-definition of the relations between the artist and technology, as proposed by Jean-Louis Boissier when he paraphrases Gilles Deleuze (who is still the most quoted reference in the French contributions listed here): “It is not a matter of turning the new media into an art, nor of putting the new media in art. It is a matter of making new media from an artist’s perspective, of being an artist in new media.”<sup>17</sup> It is in the wake of this that he defends an interactive aesthetic peculiar to the visual arts, with a screen as a performative entity, both moveable and mobilizable, in a “relational perspective”, as a system which goes beyond the optical perspective. One thinks, for example, of the performance installation *Les Perspectiveurs*, shown among other venues at the Palazzo delle Papesse in Siena (October 2004-January 2005), as part of *Invisible*, next to the Pinacoteca with Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s *The Annunciation* (1344), one of the models for that work.

- 10 The model is essentially that of the ‘expanded cinema’ which, over and above the aesthetic utopia of its origins, is seen today as a media environment governed by an expanded perception. Because of technology, this synaesthetic reconfiguration of the

visual arts affects both the stuff of the images and the spectator's body as much as the public and social space. Luc Vancheri thus proposes a radical upset of cinema through an archaeological perspective: "We may thus wonder not if what is recomposed outside of the cinema merits the name of *cinema* or not, but rather if the historic form that we have known is not an exception in a history of the *cinema* which does not end with the economic and artistic adjustment that the Lumière camera underwent";<sup>18</sup> "It seems that the name of *cinema* has now been freed from its historical conditions, and that it has become the name of a specific theoretical shifter of the contemporary art field."<sup>19</sup>

- 11 This "art of possibilities whose history still needs writing" (Vancheri) takes on a tangible form in the exhibition *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2016* at the Whitney Museum of American Art (the title is borrowed from the American science-fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft), an ideal sequel of *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977* (which was held in the same institution in 2002). In *Dreamlands* there was a cohabitation, if only just, between German experimental and animated film of the 1920s and *Factory of the Sun* by Hito Steyerl, Bruce Conner and Jud Yalkut, Walt Disney's drawings for *Fantasia* (1940) and the drawings of Mathias Poledna, and even the atmospheric screen environments made by Anthony McCall (*Landscape for Fire II*, 1972), and those made by Stan VanDerBeek and Joan Brigham (*Steam Screens*, 1979). The aim of the exhibition was clear: beyond a specific feature of the cinema apparatus—and headed for a broader system of moving images,<sup>20</sup> film is a sensory and immersive experience which narrative cinema has concealed throughout its history. According to the curator Chrissie Iles, "this haptic model is as fluid and prismatic as the experiences to which it gives form. It operates by prioritizing the senses, the eye, immersive space, the body, and the all-surrounding image, using surprise, shock, touch, light, darkness, synesthesia, and spectacle."<sup>21</sup> The flatness of the screen in the cinema auditorium, "hemmed with black like a letter of condolence",<sup>22</sup> leaves room, in accordance with Giuliana Bruno's hunch, for the anatomical dissection table, meaning for a spectacle which, like the cinema, is at once private and public.

- 12 4.

- 13 The film medium is a form of filmic matter. Here we rediscover the material quality of sensitive screens, which display the visual deposit and the weight of the images projected. How are we to regard what is deposited on their smooth surface, the forms of compressed time, and even the trace of mnemonic images which call into question the partition between exterior space and psychic activity? How will we describe the imprints of a flow of moving images on a screen, and a fluidity which resists being fixed? Such are the questions raised by Alain Fleischer's experimental work, in its transfer between the photographic medium and the filmic medium, which the artist sums up in two sentences in *Ecrans sensibles*: "This film is the history of an image" and "This image is the history of a film".

- 14 Back in 1996, Hubert Damisch was already questioning the capacity of the empty screen to "create imagery", and the fantasy, fueled by film, that "the screen may be affected by the passage of images, and these latter leave some trace on it, the memory of which it keeps in one way or another, until it itself 'creates a picture'".<sup>23</sup> In a recent interview, Hubert Damisch referred to a famous passage by Claude Lévi-Strauss, "A key formula of art history as it should be practiced", whereby the mask, wrote the anthropologist, "is not first of all what it represents but what it transforms, which is to say what it chooses not to represent".<sup>24</sup> It is in this perspective that we must situate the "work of the picture"

which, in dealing with Brunelleschian perspective, Hubert Damisch borrows from the Freudian “work of the dream”. Has the time finally come, for art historians and critics, to take up the challenge posed by the “work of the screen”?

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## NOTES

1. Cf. Royoux, Jean-Christophe. *Arts plastiques/cinéma : Mikhaïl Bakhtine et les arts*, Brussels : La Part de l'Œil, 2016, (La Part de l'Œil ; 30), p. 105-141.
2. Damisch, Hubert. “La Retenue. Alain Fleischer”, in *La Ruse du tableau : la peinture ou ce qu'il en reste*, Paris : Seuil 2016, p. 169-178, cit. p. 170
3. Jaudon, Raphaël. *Ecrans*, 1/3, 2015, an issue about the *Expanded Cinema* edited by Raphaël Jaudon, Dario Marchiori, and Luc Vanchéri, p. 17. The homonymous issue of screens was dealt with in n° 1, “L'Ecran expérimental” in 2013.
4. Damisch, Hubert. “Morceaux choisis”, *Projections : les transports de l'image*, Tourcoing : Le Fresnoy – Studio national des arts contemporains, 1997, p. 15-23, cit. p. 22
5. Damisch, Hubert. “La Déplacée”, *La Ruse du tableau : la peinture ou ce qu'il en reste*, *Op. cit.*, p. 217-231, cit. p. 230
6. Cit. in Boissier, Jean-Louis. *L'Ecran comme mobile*, Geneva : Mamco, 2016, p. 205
7. The Sigmund Freud passage, contained in *Malaise dans la civilisation*, is quoted by Bruno Goosse in *Arts plastiques/cinéma : Mikhaïl Bakhtine et les arts*, *Op. cit.*, p. 16.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 17
9. Damisch, Hubert. “La retenue. Alain Fleischer”, *Op. cit.*, p. 172
10. Damisch, Hubert. “Trouer l'écran”, *Pour un cinéma comparé : influences et répétitions*, (ed. by Jacques Aumont), Lectures at the Collège d'histoire de l'art cinématographique, Paris : Cinémathèque française/Musée du cinéma, 1996, p. 321-336, cit. p. 324
11. Freud, Sigmund. *Des souvenirs-couverture* [1899], in *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. III, *Psychanalyse, 1894-1899*, Paris : PUF, 1989, p. 254-276. “Strachey's translation ‘screen memories’ carries the potential double meaning of screen as both a filtering/distorting device and as the material surface of projection. In 1899, Freud certainly was not referring to a film screen or even to the screens of magic lantern projection. But in the slippage of metaphor, the double-entendre forms the basis for readings of how films, seen on the screen, ‘screen’ memories” (Friedberg, Ann. *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, Cambridge (Mass.), London: The MIT Press, 2006, p. 17).  
On the relation between screen-picture and screen-memory, cf. Perret, Catherine. “Tableaux-écrans”, *Peinture : Cinq regards*, Paris : Galerie Les Filles du calvaire (ed. by Christine Ollier) ; Paris : Le Regard, 2005, p. 75-87.
- On the use of Freud's metapsychology for the cinematographic system, read Jean-Christophe Royoux in *Arts plastiques/cinéma : Mikhaïl Bakhtine et les arts*, *Op. cit.*, p. 105-141.
12. Vancheri, Luc. *Voir selon les écrans, penser selon les écrans*, Paris : Mimésis, 2016, (Images, médiums), p. 59-72 (ed. by Jacopo Bodini, Mauro Carbone). To take a screen which protects us from excitements, and perceptive and emotive shocks, Mauro Carbone (in *Vivre par(mi) les écrans*, *Op. cit.*, p. 257-273), for his part, prefers the word “prosthesis”. Cf. Carbone, Mauro. *Philosophie-écrans : du cinéma à la révolution numérique*, Paris : Vrin, 2016. On the transformation of our perceptive structures in the digital age, cf., also Stéphane Vial in *Vivre par(mi) les écrans*, *Op. cit.*, p. 63-85.

13. Casetti, Francesco. *Vivre par(mi) les écrans*, *Op. cit.*, p. 286. Cf. also Id., “What is a Screen, Nowadays?”, *Public Space, Media Space*, Houndmills, New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 16-40 (ed. by Chris Berry, Janet Harbord, Rachel Moore).
14. For a Google Glass archaeology, cf. Huhtamo, Erkki in *Vivre par(mi) les écrans*, *Op. cit.*, p. 89-111.
15. Sobchack, Vivian. *Vivre par(mi) les écrans*, *Op. cit.*, p. 30 et p. 35
16. Stiegler, Bernard. *Vivre par(mi) les écrans*, *Op. cit.*, p. 20
17. Boissier, Jean-Louis. *L'Ecran comme mobile*, *Op. cit.*, p. 36. For Gilles Deleuze, see *L'Image-mouvement : cinéma 1*, Paris : Minuit, 1983 ; *L'Image-temps : cinéma 2*, Paris : Minuit, 1985 ; “Le Cerveau, c'est l'écran”, *Cahiers du cinéma*, n° 380, February 1986, p. 25-32 , then in *Deux régimes de fous : textes et entretiens 1975-1995*, Paris : Minuit, 2003, p. 263-271 (ed. by David Lapoujade).
18. Vancheri, Luc. In *Arts plastiques/cinéma : Mikhaïl Bakhtine et les arts*, *Op. cit.*, p. 160
19. *Ibid.*, p. 161
20. It is symptomatic that, in the 53 interventions brought together in the French books listed here, we find just one reference (coming from a professor working in the United States) to the monograph that Giuliana Bruno has written about screens: *Surface. Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.
21. Iles, Chrissie. *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2016*, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art ; New Haven, London : Yale University Press, 2016, p. 121.
22. Jean-Louis Baudry, cit. in Royoux, Jean-Christophe. in *Arts plastiques/cinéma : Mikhaïl Bakhtine et les arts*, *Op. cit.*, p. 107
23. Damisch, Hubert. “Trouer l'écran”, *Op. cit.*, p. 334-335
24. “Hors Cadre. Entretien avec Hubert Damisch”, by Giovanni Careri and Bernard Vouilloux, in *Perspective : actualité en histoire de l'art*, n° 1, 2013, p. 11-23, cit. p. 17